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ABSTRACT

Publishers, authors, and the schools must be more respectful of parents' values in the preparation and selection of children's books. The use of obscene words, violence, explicit sex, and seeming approval of controversial positions in texts causes many problems. Although the approval of all parents obviously cannot be won, the children's book publishing industry and the schools must chart a middle course between the scholar's legitimate claim to academic freedom in presenting new knowledge and social commentary on the one hand, and the legitimate expectations of parents that schools will respect their moral and ethical values on the other. Since parents have the ultimate responsibility for the upbringing of their children, their desires should take precedence. (SK)

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SCHOOLS, PARENTS, AND TEXTBOOKS*

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U.S. COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

As I look around and see how many publishing houses are represented here today, I feel somewhat like Dorothy and her friends confronting the Wizard. Remember that vast hall, those flashing lights, the booming voice, all those symbols of absolute and spine-tingling authority?

I could be similarly intimidated by this audience, because you are the wizards, the power structure of the children's trade and textbook industry. The member companies of AAP's School Division produce more than 80 percent of all instructional materials used in the Nation's schools, and other AAP divisions increase the total to 90 percent or more.

But I am not intimidated by all this because, first, I know that you are accomplished professionals doing your best to give educators the materials they need and want; and, second, I know that after a few scary passages Dorothy and her friends came out all right.

You have a tremendous job to do, and you do it very well. To turn a profit, even to stay in business, you have to sell enough school officials in 50 States and some 17,000 school districts on the quality and relevance of your products. That alone requires you to keep up with changes in teaching methods, subject matter, and social attitudes, not to mention changes necessitated by legislation on civil rights, women's rights, and other matters by Congress and the State legislatures and by court decisions.

Yet I believe you have a responsibility above and beyond your responsibility to your stockholders to produce books, films, and other materials that schools will buy. This larger responsibility is to parents and students and communities. It has to do with the school as an institution that must be responsive to the community that supports it. It has to do with the wishes of parents who entrust the education of impressionable young children to teachers they scarcely know, or don't know at all, whose values may differ somewhat from their own. It has to do with the subjects you select for books and other materials and how these subjects are handled.

The Wizard of Oz, corny as it may seem to TV-oriented young people today, has always struck me as about the right combination of suspense, which naturally appeals to children, and the happy ending that takes the edge off the spooky parts. This children's classic is a far cry from some of the current juvenile literature that appears to emphasize violence--and obscenity--and moral judgments that run counter to tradition--all in the name of keeping up with the real world.

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What is really taught in a story about a boy who drowns a favorite family cat to make his parents love him more? What is really conveyed to children when they are asked to debate the pros and cons of stealing, the implication being that sometimes it is all right to steal? To be relevant do high schools really need to offer a story about a hundred-dollar whore? Assuming that there are great concepts to be taught in the stories about prostitutes, stealing, and drowning cats, do we need to dwell so much on the sordid details?

In recent weeks such books and films have provoked literally violent reactions from parents. Certainly I deplore this violence. It is no solution. But there are fundamental issues involved. I would like to comment on some of these issues and talk about the content and selection of instructional materials and about where I think the responsibilities of publishers and educators and parents begin and end.

I think we all need to go back to the basic question: What is the purpose of the American education system and how can instructional materials be used more effectively to fulfill that purpose?

There are the obvious and immediate answers. Clearly, a primary function of education is to give children and young people the skills--from the Three Rs on up--to function in a complex, highly technical society. Beyond that is the need to broaden their intellectual horizons and enhance their problem solving abilities.

But America has always asked more of its schools and colleges. Many of you remember the children's books written by Abraham Rosenbach in the 1930s. Dr. Rosenbach made a profound observation about juvenile literature. He said that subjects dealt with in children's books, more than in any other class of literature, reflect the attitudes of the generation that produces the books. By implication, these attitudes cover the range of social concerns--politics, religion, ethics, race relations, boy-girl relations, work, family, country, and individual goals and aspirations. School books, in other words, are a distillation of the values and attitudes that one generation wants to pass on to the next.

With the Nation's Bicentennial approaching, we are increasingly conscious of our heritage and our beginnings, and in historical perspective I think Dr. Rosenbach's theory holds up well.

Children in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were taught to read in order to read the Bible and further their religious education. Writing and arithmetic had much lower orders of priority. This conscious decision by parents was undoubtedly based on strong conviction--increased, no doubt, by the hardships the colonists were enduring to give their children a new start in a new land.

Similarly, McGuffey's famous readers stressed the values that Americans in the late 1800s wanted to instill in their children--patriotism, integrity, honesty, industry, temperance, courage, and politeness. These readers sold

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120 million copies. While McGuffey's selections from great literature would seem stilted by today's standards, there was certainly nothing wrong with the values they taught. We could use more emphasis on some of those values today.

I do not mean to imply that parents today expect the same things from the education system that parents did in colonial America or the Victorian period. Actually, they expect far more. Parents are better educated, more widely traveled, and--thanks largely to television--more aware of the world than parents of any previous generation. So are students. Publishers must be aware of this sophistication. At the same time, they must recognize that we have compulsory attendance laws and that children are the captive audience of the schools. Parents have a right to expect that the schools, in their teaching approaches and selection of instructional materials, will support the values and standards that their children are taught at home. And if the schools cannot support those values they must at least avoid deliberate destruction of them.

One of the real problems in the production and selection of instructional materials is that parents and communities differ so widely in what they consider appropriate. We are probably the world's most polyglot nation, with many subcultures increasingly interested in maintaining or re-establishing their identity in the larger society. We come from many socio-economic backgrounds. We have many divergent religious viewpoints. Our positions on politics and education and other things that matter run the gamut from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal.

Your companies are doing a fine job in responding to the needs of these various subcultures and communities. You are beginning to offer materials that reflect the rich cultural heritage and values of our Native American, Spanish speaking, and other minority populations. You are also beginning to get a handle on the sex stereotype problem, getting the girls out of the kitchen and the boys out of the treehouse--or at least letting the girls join them.

Certainly, these new materials need to include an introduction to the problems and pitfalls that children are likely to encounter as they grow up. Learning about the adult world is fundamental to the learning process itself. Surely this can be done without resorting to explicit violence, or explicit sex, or four-letter words. Most of the mass media are still pretty careful, rightly I think, about controlling the use of obscene language in TV and radio programing and in printed materials that reach into millions of American homes. (There are some exceptions, of course.) And I am happy to see that violence on television is not quite so gory as it used to be.

True, some people say that children are still exposed to more violence on television in a single evening than they are likely to encounter at school in a whole term. This may be true, but it is not the issue. What children are exposed to in the home is totally the responsibility of their

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parents. Parental judgments may vary a great deal, and what children are allowed to watch on TV will reflect these judgments. But when parents send their children to school they delegate some of this authority to school administrators and teachers. These professionals should in turn respect the broad spectrum of parental attitudes represented by the children in their classrooms.

Let me turn now to the question of academic freedom and the implied threat of academic censorship that some people may read into what I have said.

I recognize that much of the world's great literature is full of violent scenes and situations. As a teenager, I shuddered as I read the closing pages of A Tale of Two Cities...Madame Defarge knitting as the tumbrils rolled up to the guillotine.

It was high drama. Madame symbolized the Reign of Terror. But overriding her glee at the fall of the French aristocracy was the nobility of the sacrifice being made by Sydney Carton as he mounted the scaffold. Violence served as the vehicle to say some powerful things about love and honor and trust and responsibility. There are basic human values, and they are the forces that make great books great. I am not sure they are present to the extent they should be in some of the current literature purchased by schools for classroom and library use.

As scholars prepare new textbooks and other materials, as you publish them and schools select them, I hope everyone involved will keep in mind the idea behind an anecdote I heard the other day.

Following some dispute or other, Johnny poked his classmate Robert in the nose. Naturally, the teacher chastised Johnny for this action, and Johnny replied: "It's a free country. I know my rights."

"Well, yes," the teacher said, "you have rights, the same rights your classmates have and every American has. But your rights end where Robert's nose begins."

I think this little story says some important things. In writing textbooks and other materials for school use, scholars do have the right, indeed the obligation, to present new knowledge and to comment on social changes in ways that will stimulate and motivate students, excite their curiosity, and make them want to learn. Teachers have both the right and obligation to use these materials in ways that will enhance the learning program. Indeed, teachers are getting to be very creative in developing supplementary materials to illustrate and expand on textbook themes, and this creativity should be encouraged.

But I feel strongly that the scholar's freedom of choice and the teacher's freedom of choice must have the approval and support of most parents. I do not suggest that we seek to win approval of all parents, for

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that would not be attainable---but schools without parental support and approval are headed for failure. Without having books and materials that are so namby-pamby they avoid all controversy, we must seek published materials that do not insult the values of most parents. Where there is basic conflict, no one really wins, and children suffer. However, parents have the ultimate reponsibility for the upbringing of their children, and their desires should take precedence. The school's authority ends where it infringes on this parental right.

I say these things knowing that parents, being human, can also be dead wrong, at least in the opinion of some educators and other members of society. I know that parents can have religious convictions or moral convictions that differ from those of the school people. And every society has at least a few holdouts against legal and established institutions. nevertheless, of whatever ethnic background or philosophical persuasion, most parents are responsible arbiters of their children's best interests. We must pay more attention to their values and seek their advice more frequently.

So I think the children's book publishing industry, and the schools, need to chart a middle course between the scholar's legitimate claim to academic freedom in presenting new knowledge and social commentary on the one hand, and the legitimate expectations of parents that schools will respect their moral and ethical values on the other.

Fortunately, some of the newer instructional approaches will help to dehorn the dilemma in time. Certainly, wider use of individualized instruction for each child will give his or her parents the opportunity to rule out an objectionable book or film without affecting other children.

What the present controversy comes down to, I believe, is a growing concern on the part of parents that they have lost control over their children's education and therefore over their children's future.

You can do much to restore that confidence. We need instructional programs, for instance, that teach the principles of modern mathematics but also show pupils how to add and subtract. Parents are uptight about this one. We need programs that incorporate the career education concept into academic studies so that young people will know where they are heading when they leave school or college for the world of work. We need good literature that will appeal to children without relying too much on blood and guts and street language for their own sake. We need films and other materials that are realistic about the world we live in yet make young people want to be a part of it.

For impressionable young minds, it is easy to document and decry the world's evils. It is more difficult to end on an upbeat note that gives youngsters something to hang on to. Young people need faith and hope and confidence in the future. They need a yellow brick road. And I don't see much wrong with a rainbow either.

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